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What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?

Integrated strategies and activities to communicate the value of official statistics

Note by the Turkish Statistical Institute

Summary

This paper considers how to increase the value of official statistics through their increased use. Activities enhancing the reliability and usefulness of official statistics are expected to add value to statistics. Firstly, national statistical offices should consider ways to improve and maintain public trust towards official statistics. The next step should be to better understand users of statistics who have different characteristics and varying data needs. These differences of each user group should have an influence on the measures taken by statistical offices. It is a challenge but the good outcome would be valuable for national statistical offices.

This paper discusses some views and strategies and shares the experience of the Turkish Statistical Institution obtained during the preparation and implementation of a communication and dissemination strategy.

The paper is presented for discussion to the Conference of European Statisticians seminar on "What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?"

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I. Introduction

1. Official statistics are used by policy makers, government decision makers, researchers, media, financial and business world, and finally by individuals. Using official statistics adds value to the society, and its economy and culture. Perhaps the value of official statistics can be best rated by the extent of their use in society.

2. Communicating the value of official statistics to the community is expected to promote use of official statistics. That will further help the society to be more tolerant to the burden imposed on respondents during data collection process. So, it seems that communicating the value of official statistics has a positive effect both for statistical production and the use of statistics. The Turkish Statistical Institution (TurkStat) has learned two simple but important lessons regarding better use of statistics. First, an NSI (NSI) should be widely known and trusted. Secondly, the better official statistics are served; the more and efficiently they are used. These two issues have much deeper meaning than first appears. Therefore, an NSI should have a well-planned dissemination and communication strategy in the first place.

3. TurkStat defined a number of activities to react to the above mentioned concerns. These activities are expected to help to communicate the value of official statistics. The activities include building trust by organizing focus group meetings, providing clear and easily accessible descriptions of production methods, explaining the procedures for corrections of statistical figures and using an official statistics logo in the releases. Activities aiming at improving the response to user needs also include preparing a tailor made dissemination model for providing publications also at the province level, using special press releases to get the attention of the media and releasing publications focused on special occasions. The important actions also include redesigning the institution's website, promoting access to microdata and using social media to increase the reach of official statistics. All of these activities are expected to increase the respect and interest of people towards official statistics.

II. Issues and challenges

4. Data providers range from an individual which is the smallest statistical unit, to the public institutions from which country-wide business registers are obtained. In addition, data providers can in many cases be also data users. Thus, an NSI is at the center of a very crowded data traffic and communication world. There are several issues and challenges in this data traffic relating to communicating the true value of official statistics.

5. An NSI should be well known to the society and also be recognized by society. TurkStat has noticed recently that its users and respondents are more distant than expected. Only a small part of society knows Turkstat. Most people do not know the institute, are not aware of its existence; they don't know what Turkstat does and how. The general public has limited knowledge about the fact that their life is not only the source of statistics but also very much affected by statistics. But, how can we close this gap? Should statisticians wait until people find statistics by chance, or should statisticians show the way and lead users to official statistics? An NSI has to be proactive about these issues. There is a clear need of analysing users and respondents who have various needs with different specificities. Different user needs may require different approach. The operational steps of being visible to the society should be planned carefully in order to create and maintain a good reputation. Here, transparency and accountability are the two main values an NSI should provide to the users. It is clear that people cooperate more and provide data easily when they trust the national statistical office.

6. Understanding the actual needs of users is another issue. Can we expect user needs to be satisfied by the standard services provided? Is it too difficult to provide the statistics as users want them? Could some of the statistics be more interesting if they were served in another way or with other dimensions? Can statisticians guess what users need and be ready when statistics are needed? All of these questions refer to another set of important challenge and the solutions require a lot of work.

III. How to increase trust towards a national statistical institute?

7. There could be a number of activities to create trust towards an NSI and its official statistics. The following text describes several of these important activities in more detail.

A. Focus group meetings

8. Establishing and maintaining good communication with users and respondents is crucial for an NSI. Each target group might have their own way of communication. An NSI should be patient enough to visit representatives of each group in order to both promote official statistics and listen to what users want. The messages conveyed in the meetings and the materials used may differ based on the user group. It might be less probable to have visitors from parliament in the office, whereas many press members would desire to see the inside of the NSI. Some government departments, agencies and Ministries are active users of statistics while they are also producers of administrative records. Therefore, organizing working group meetings with them could be helpful in support of the coordination role of an NSI. Good cooperation with the scientific community will enhance the use of statistics by the academia and create a platform for methodological developments. Media, meanwhile, should not only be treated as a target group but also as an important and efficient partner for reaching other users of statistics. Periodic meetings with the media are, therefore, crucial. Last but not the least, meetings with civil society and nongovernmental organizations should not be overlooked. Meetings could be very good platforms for transmitting messages and describing the principles of practices, as well as receiving important feedback.

B. Accessible production methods

9. NSIs need to establish well designed production processes in order to be reliable and consistent. The methods should be clear and their descriptions (i.e. metadata) easily available. It would be difficult to sustain trust while not trusting users with the metadata. Clarity and transparency creates a more trustful environment for users including researchers. This in turn will ensure the determination of any possible inconsistence or error. Harmonization and standardization of the metadata in each process of statistical production still remains a challenge for NSIs. Since managing metadata needs an integrated approach, NSIs should capture all the related documentation in statistical process. The user must be able to access metadata easily. Easily accessible and understandable data will critically contribute to the use of statistics in society.

C. Clear procedures for the correction of errors

10. An error-free environment would be a dream for an NSI. However, trying to achieve it is next to impossible and would be costly. Instead, an NSI should have clear procedures in place in order to manage and correct errors. Errors need to be processed as soon as they are detected; and an error should be corrected even if the data are already disseminated.

Although declaring the existence of an error disturbs the reputation of an NSI; the cost of hiding an error is even worse and could sometimes be fatal. Statistics may sometimes include an error and society has the right to know about these errors and their corrections. The best approach is to have a regulation about what to do when an error is identified. TurkStat's regulation for the management of errors classifies errors into two groups. Minor (non-misleading) errors may or may not be corrected depending on the case. Major errors on the other hand require correction as well as a declaration to the public about the reason of the error. All errors are recorded for administrative and statistical purposes. Having the errors declared and providing statistics on errors is a sign of self-confidence for an NSI. TurkStat has made announcements to the public about a few errors since the regulations came into effect in June 2012.

D. Official statistics logo

11. Since official statistics are increasingly competing against other sources of information, a distinctive sign for official statistics has become necessary. Data produced by institutions and organizations within the framework of an official statistics programme are considered official statistics and are usually denoted by a badge. However, in order to create value around the official statistics logo, TurkStat decided that official statistics must also fulfill a set of quality requirements (existence of metadata, timeliness etc.) in order to earn this badge. As the coordinator of official statistics in Turkey, TurkStat believes in the motivating power of the badge for a better quality in statistical production.

IV. How to make official statistics more widely used?

12. Today Internet is accepted as being the basic and the most effective dissemination tool. However, placing statistics on the web does not guarantee that users are going to use them. TurkStat is aware of this fact and looking for steps to deal with the issue. Several special services and products are being created and made accessible to the users. Analyzing and classifying users have showed us that each user group may require different products and use statistics through different media tools. Aiming at being a user oriented NSI, TurkStat has developed several tailor made solutions for the target user groups.

A. Tailor made dissemination of news releases and publications

13. An NSI should pay attention to informing the society about the scope of official statistics. This can be done by improving communication with users and finding tailor made solutions for target user groups. Official statistics are used by many different user groups each having somewhat different data needs. Finding new presentation methods special to each user group may help to promote the use of statistics. To this end, TurkStat developed a model to increase the use of official statistics across the country. The model is based on preparing various information packages according to user needs. Users can basically be grouped into two categories: users at the national level and users at the local/provincial level. There are also other classifications such as administrators, press members, academics, non-profit organizations and the business community.

14. TurkStat sends localized or specially prepared custom packages to its group of users every day. The staff of 26 regional offices with a team in the central office carry out the operation. A total of 4,000 individuals from different target groups are informed by almost 27 different version of the same press release. The feedback was excellent; many positive comments, especially from local authorities, were received and many people contacted the central office as well as the regional offices to get involved in the system. Starting in 2014,

the model has been fully implemented all over the country. TurkStat recognized that localized and specialized information attracts much more attention from users. There was not any less data on the website before this dissemination model created. However, many of the users simply did not know where to find the pieces of information before the information was made visible for them.

B. Selected indicators by provinces

15. It has become clear that regional statistics are needed. Therefore, preparing and disseminating printed or electronic books with statistical indicators at a province level attract a lot of attention of local users. For this purpose, TurkStat prepares since 2012 "Selected Indicators by Provinces" series annually for every province in Turkey. The publications which include many visual graphical representations are also prepared electronically; and a tool has been developed for the website to access and download the whole set of indicators. With this tool, pdf publications were made accessible through geographic locations of provinces on the map of Turkey. In addition, a flash disk was designed as a mobile electronic version. The products were submitted to local government units as well as journalists. Positive feedback was received saying that "this was the first time all necessary figures were found together". No new data was created, the package just provided the same statistics in a different way, in the way that users needed.

C. Publications for special occasions

16. Another good way to uplift current statistics could be by preparing publications for special occasions. Bringing statistics together around a subject like women, children, etc. could create an interesting publication for users. Since 2012, TurkStat started preparing publications and press releases for special occasions such as June 5, the World Environment Day, and July 11, the World Population Day, etc. Moreover, TurkStat publishes thematic publications for special population groups with the purpose of enhancing the series of press releases and publications. Other examples are Statistics on Children (April 23, National Sovereignty and International Children's Day), Statistics on Family (13-19 May, Family Week), Youth in Statistics (19 May, Commemoration of Atatürk, National Youth and Sports Day), Women in Statistics (March 8, International Women's Day) and Elderly Statistics. The current and future demographic structures and socio-economic characteristics such as education level, marital status, income, family life, employment status and life satisfaction are provided as press releases and publications. Target user groups for each publication are determined prior to the production in order to disseminate the products directly to the target users by delivery services.

D. Press room and special press releases

17. As stated earlier, press and media are vital partners for NSIs. The more they use official statistics, the more the community becomes aware of statistics and uses them more too. Media owns the toolset by which the value of statistics can be most efficiently and effectively communicated. It is worthwhile designing a special space on the web site for media, so they do not get lost among hundreds or thousands of tables and complex databases and metadata. The press room should also include news about methodology changes, activities of NSI and error announcements as well. Using these arguments TurkStat turned its outdated statistics press room into a fresh and more dynamic corner for media.

18. Media usually looks for news ready to print. They need statistics to be turned into knowledge and supported by easily readable graphs. National and international data comparisons usually add value. These "ready to use" news in fact ensure having a place in media more often and in people's life on a daily basis. In this context, TurkStat lately started to disseminate special news releases. They are prepared by using the currently disseminated statistics from which interesting findings are pointed out. Special press releases are submitted to the press room at 11:00, after the standard news releases take place at 10:00. An example of a special press release is given in the annex.

E. Redesigning the website and new innovative visualization tools

19. Disseminating enormous amounts of information through Internet is although effective, quite challenging. Millions and billions of data and related metadata should be sorted out to create simple packages of information, for people who do not like to wait for more than a second. Therefore, most NSIs struggle in creating efficient websites. If a user waits for the pages more than a couple of seconds on every visit, the user might lose interest. Therefore, the main objective should be to make the pages more user-friendly and to make them easier to navigate. Statistics should be provided in a step by step logic instead of putting everything on a single page. TurkStat deployed the new website in July 2013. The initial feedback of the frequent users on the website was that the previous website was easier to use. Current evaluations, however, showed a change. Users think that it is much easier now to find what they want and download it. TurkStat analyses the use of its website with a User Satisfaction Survey as well as through individual messages sent by users. In fact, it should be noted that creating easy to use communication channels resulted in an increase in the number and content of feedback.

20. In the digital age, the ability to explore the visual representation of massive data and to detect meaningful patterns and trends is becoming more popular. Readers can easily understand visual representation. Data visualization lets people look at vast quantities of data quickly and efficiently, and can help to improve understanding of statistics. These new data dissemination techniques may upgrade people's perception of official statistics. For that purpose, TurkStat is working on developing new visualization tools such as infographics and animation films. In this context, TurkStat had three animation films created by a professional firm. The series of movies were prepared around an ordinary "Family of Trust" who faces official statistics in their daily life. The projects regarding infographics and animation films will help to improve the diversity of communication channels and products which will add more value to official statistics.

F. Promoting access to microdata

21. Providing access to microdata is a key challenge for all NSIs. While some national considerations remain, particularly concerning the legal framework, there has been considerable progress over the past ten years to find new ways to provide microdata. The main reason – and often the only explicit reason – why data producers share their microdata is to support research. Access to microdata and the related analysis helps society to have insight into and a much better understanding of social and economic issues.

22. Microdata should be supported with good quality metadata for users to make good analysis. Turkstat provides access and facilities for using microdata to researches in accordance with the legislation and based on the demand of national and international researchers. TurkStat has prepared a regulation defining the rules to access and use microdata. Researchers have to go through an accreditation procedure in order to gain the right to access data. Microdata are classified into two groups. The first group consists of on-

site access microdata, which includes data on businesses and foreign trade. This type of data is permitted to be accessed only in Data Research Centers located at the central office and the five regional offices. Because of data confidentiality concerns, these outputs cannot be taken out without being examined by the staff. The second type of data in Group B covers data from household surveys. These data are distributed on compact discs (CDs). TurkStat is searching for possibilities to offer remote access to users of these data.

G. Social media

23. NSIs also use social media to distribute statistical information, to promote the use of statistics and to increase statistical literacy. In most cases social media is seen as a tool for increasing the use of statistical information in society, and for reaching as wide audiences as possible. By providing official statistics through networks and mobile devices an NSI could create an image that it is both user oriented and adapted to advanced technological tools. TurkStat is aware of the importance of social media. However, it is also important to clarify the objectives and rules for using social media for official statistics. The number of followers of TurkStat in Twitter is nearly 14,000. The number of likes in Facebook is about 6,000. Social media can be a very useful tool for dissemination and discussion of statistics, as it offers tailor-made solutions for reaching individuals interested in official data.

H. Official statistics programme portal

24. NSIs, although being in the center of official statistics, are not the only producer of statistics. Many other government institutions also produce statistics. Users of official statistics sometimes struggle in finding the correct address for certain statistics. There is, therefore, a clear need for a central access point for all official statistics. This will not only make the life easier for users but it would also promote the recognition of the "official statistics" concept. This may also be a good tool for better cooperation among involved institutions and can help to improve quality of statistics. Turkstat recently finished the design and development of the web site www.officialstatistics.gov.tr. The site is now open for testing by the partner institutions. In addition, TurkStat plans to make use of this platform as a base for the application tool of "Inventory for international data dissemination".

V. Conclusions and recommendations

25. Value of official statistics can be best rated by the amount of use. Therefore, use of official statistics should be promoted so that it becomes more wide spread. If statistics are both reliable and easily available they should be used more by society.

26. Reliability can be improved by creating trust towards the NSI and official statistics. Users should know and trust the NSI. An NSI should know their customers before describing its goals. User groups as well as responders should be defined and each shou'd be analyzed for their needs and behaviors. Then an NSI can be active towards users and explain what the NSI and the official statistics are about. Its products and services should also be trustworthy. In order to achieve this, official statistics should be produced according to international standards (e.g. Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and European Statistical System Code of Practice). Users should be convinced that the NSI would not hide information regarding methodologies applied or errors. Besides, introducing a badge for official statistics as a measure of quality could enhance users' confidence. All of these activities are aimed to help the community to be aware of the existence and reliability of official statistics.

27. Easy availability of statistics to users is crucial for the wide spread use of statistics. Availability, however, should not be treated in its classical, technical meaning only. Availability means making data accessible and presenting the data in a way which is customized according to users' needs. It involves an analysis of users and may lead to the development of very interesting products based on existing data. Specialized forms of news releases and regional statistics as well as special publications are examples of this kind. Official statistics are consumed better when they are tailored to match users' needs. Therefore, a special website providing access to all official statistics is a nice facility for users. It will also play an essential role in the coordination of activities among official statistics producers. Although such a website would be complex in terms of the amount of information, it has to be as simple as possible. Because having a simple and accessible website is much more powerful than a complex one. The simpler the page the easier and more users it can serve. Social media is another platform for NSIs' visibility, but being responsive online may require quite a lot of effort. Finally, access to microdata has become more important and it attracts researchers with a potential to provide society with interesting analysis.

28. NSIs should look for intelligent, technological approaches for the production and dissemination of official statistics. All of the activities should be guided by a communication and dissemination strategy, and the progress should be carefully monitored. These tools should help NSIs on their path towards improving the use of official statistics and creating and communicating the value of official statistics to the public.

Annex 1 Example of a special press release

TURKISH STATISTICAL INSTITUTE

News for Press Room

Available only in Turkish

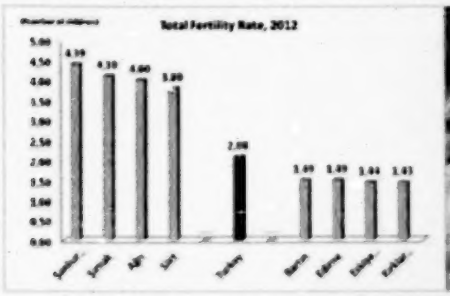
No: 2014 / 1

3 February 2014

In Turkey, while 146 babies are born every hour, 2 infants are died

According to the World Bank data, while 15 000 babies are born every hour, 120 infants are died in the world. In Turkey, while 146 babies are born every hour, 2 infants are died, as well.

In Turkey, women gave birth average 2,08 children according to the 2012 data. When the average number of children of woman giving birth is analyzed by provinces, the highest value is seen in Şanlıurfa with 4.39 children. Şırnak with 4.1 children, Ağrı with 4 children and Siirt with 3.8 children follow Şanlıurfa. The province which had the lowest average number of children was Kırklareli with 1.43 children. Eskişehir with 1.44 children, Edirne and Bartın with 1.49 children follow Kırklareli.



According to the 2012 data, approximately 11,6 babies die before their first birthday in Turkey. 65,9% of infants die before completing their first month. When infant deaths are examined by provinces, the highest infant deaths are seen in Malatya. 19,5 infant deaths per 1,000 live births were occurred in Malatya. Ağrı with 18,1 deaths, Bingöl and Siirt with 17,6 deaths follow Malatya. The lowest infant death was seen in Kırklareli. 6,1 deaths per 1,000 live births were occurred in Kırklareli. Bayburt with 6,3 infant deaths, Kırşehir with 7,1 infant deaths and Gümüşhane with 7,5 infant deaths follow Kırklareli.

Source: 1. TurkStat, Birth Statistics, 2012 http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?tb_id=1060
2. TurkStat, Death Statistics, 2012 http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?tb_id=1060

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